January 2002

Having a Longer View on Downtown Living

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Reprinted from *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Volume 68, Issue 1, January 2002, pages 5-21.

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Abstract
Many American cities are experiencing a rise in the number of residents in their downtowns. This phenomenon has deep roots but is extremely fragile. Six approaches to developing downtown housing dominate the arrangements. The public and private sectors have cooperated in many ways to attract this type of investment. Downtown housing, however, is only part of the larger puzzle of urban revitalization and metropolitan growth. Many questions regarding the nature of downtown land uses, including the relationship between housing and employment, remain. This article presents statistical evidence regarding downtown housing for 45 cities and outlines the approaches many have employed to capture these housing units. It also demonstrates the difficulty of defining a city's downtown.

Comments
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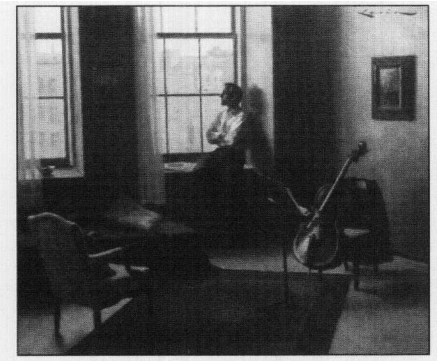

Steven Levin's painting *Clouds* depicts the interior of a studio apartment in the warehouse district of Minneapolis. The downtown building, which formerly housed a John Deere factory, illustrates one type of downtown housing discussed in Eugenie Birch's Longer View article.

Levin lives and works in Minneapolis and has exhibited widely, including with the Plein Air Painters of America, the Salmagundi Club in New York City, and the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in London. Thanks to the Gandy Gallery (http://www.gandygallery.com/) for their help in securing use of this image.

Having a Longer View on Downtown Living

Eugenie Ladner Birch

Many American cities are experiencing a rise in the number of residents in their downtowns. This phenomenon has deep roots but is extremely fragile. Six approaches to developing downtown housing dominate the arrangements. The public and private sectors have cooperated in many ways to attract this type of investment. Downtown housing, however, is only one part of the larger puzzle of urban revitalization and metropolitan growth. Many questions regarding the nature of downtown land uses, including the relationship between housing and employment, remain. This article presents statistical evidence regarding downtown housing for 45 cities and outlines the approaches many have employed to capture these housing units. It also

It all sounds so easy and looks so clear! (In reality it is not, but that is jumping ahead of the story.) In 1998, after completing a telephone survey of representatives in 24 cities, the Fannie Mae Foundation and Brookings Institution Center for Urban and Metropolitan Policy trumpeted an expected rise in downtown living by 2010. Houston anticipated a more than 300% increase in its downtown population, and Cleveland, Denver, Memphis, and Seattle envisioned increases of residents in their centers of 100% or more. City editors splashed the story across their front pages, and 2 years later, after a quick scan of the early returns from the Census 2000, this optimism seemed justified. Brookings and Fannie Mae issued a census note, *Downtown Rebound*, incorporating the recent findings (Sohmer & Lang, 2001).[1] Downtown population growth in several major cities confirmed the estimates—there were some differences from the original projections, but nonetheless so many cities experienced dramatic increases that *USA Today* carried a triumphant headline shouting "Downtowns Make Cities Winners" (El Nasr, 2001).

In the period between the first and second reports, I undertook an expanded research project to take a deeper look at downtown living with funding from Fannie Mae, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and the University of Pennsylvania. I broadened the sample, defined downtown boundaries with local assistance, and traced progress from a 1970 baseline.[2] Table 1 shows that in the past decade, the majority of cities in the sample had gained residents in their downtowns. Before reporting more findings, I will provide some background to put the new information into context.

Downtown Redevelopment Assumptions

The journalistic excitement reflected a sense of relief among many—especially the so-called urban growth coalition composed of mayors, business people, and procity civic leaders—and raised a bit of skepticism among their traditional opponents, those engaged in neighborhood-focused activities. Over time, procenter-city public policy has posited that downtowns are the demonstrates the difficulty of defining a city's downtown.

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Journal of the American Planning Association, Vol. 68, No. 1, Winter 2002. © American Planning Association, Chicago, IL.

TABLE 1. Downtown populations and growth rates for selected U.S. cities, 1990–2000.

City	Population 1990	Population 2000	Growth rate 1990–2000
Albuquerque*	8,496	9,187	8.13%
Atlanta	19,763	24,931	26.15
Austin	10,579	10,769	1.80
Baltimore	28,597	30,067	5.14
Boise*	2,933	3,093	5.46
Boston	77,253	80,903	4.72
Charlotte*	6,370	6,327	-0.68
Chattanooga*	12,898	13,529	4.89
Chicago	56,048	72,843	29.97
Cincinnati*	3,838	3,189	−16.91
Cleveland	7,261	9,599	32.20
Colorado Springs*	4,412	5,032	14.05
Columbus, GA*	8,476	6,412	−24.35
Columbus, OH	6,161	6,198	0.60
Dallas	11,858	15,198	28.17
Denver	2,794	4,230	51.40
Des Moines*	4,190	4,204	0.33
Detroit	34,872	35,618	2.14
Houston	7,029	7,565	7.63
Indianapolis*	14,894	13,852	−7.00
Jackson*	5,253	6,762	28.73
Lafayette*	2,759	3,338	20.99
Lexington*	5,212	4,894	−6.10
Los Angeles	34,655	36,630	5.70
Memphis	7,606	8,994	18.25
Mesa*	3,206	2,864	−10.67
Miami	15,143	19,927	31.59
Milwaukee	15,039	16,359	8.78
Minneapolis	36,334	30,299	−16.61
New Orleans*	6,988	8,051	15.21
New York*†	153,927	170,718	10.90
Norfolk*	2,390	2,881	20.54
Orlando*	17,965	15,999	−10.94
Philadelphia	74,686	78,349	4.90
Phoenix	6,517	5,925	−9.08
Pittsburgh	6,517	10,216.	56.76
Portland	9,528	12,902	35.41
Salt Lake City	4,824	5,939	23.11
San Antonio	19,603	19,236	−1.87
San Diego*	15,417	17,894	16.07
San Francisco*	32,906	43,531	32.29
Seattle	12,292	18,983	54.43
Shreveport*	377	443	17.51
St. Louis	9,109	7,511	−17.54
Washington, DC*	26,597	27,667	4.02

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1990, 2001)
*Added to the original Brookings Institution/Fannie Mae Foundation sample by the study *Downtown Living: A Deeper Look*.
†Recognizes the city's two downtowns.

economic engines of center cities, that the health of cities is critical to that of their regions, and that cities must actively pursue strategies to maintain, reinvent, and/or shore up their downtowns in order to sustain their historic positions in the national economy. Recent research has shown these assumptions to be correct (Gyrouko, 1997). Cities have been especially challenged to accomplish this goal as America's comparative advantage moved from industrial production to intelligence-based service provision and employment migrated outward to the suburbs and beyond.

Originally, postwar center-city redevelopment programs followed a three-pronged approach focusing on central business districts (CBDs). They provided new office precincts because few commercial buildings had been built between the 1920s and the 1950s. They constructed pedestrian-oriented retail facilities, often linked with adaptive reuse of historic structures, because they hoped to gain a share of the shopping lost to suburban malls. They increased access between center cities and suburbs by building new highways and associated parking because they wanted workers and shoppers to drive easily from their suburban homes to downtown. Later they included convention centers, sports arenas and stadiums, performing arts and other entertainment complexes, waterfront development, and transit malls in an effort to capture new dollars from workers, suburban shoppers, and tourists (Freiden & Sagalyn, 1989; Gratz, 1998; Robertson, 1995). Historian Carl Abbott (1993) in "Five Strategies for Downtown: Policy Discourse and Planning Since 1943" not only captured this progression but also demonstrated how changing constructs for the idea of downtown have flavored the different approaches from the end of World War II until the mid 1980s.

As cities undertook the varied projects, they worked in a climate reflecting increasing discontent with their approach. Some critics, such as Jane Jacobs (1961) and Martin Anderson (1964), found the efforts wasteful, inefficient, and ugly. Others, including Chester Hartman (1974) and Herbert Gans (1962), called them selfish, self-serving, inequitable, and wrong-headed. And a few like Charles Abrams (1965) sought the middle road, observing:

> The mass displacements of the renewal program have led to an increasing barrage of criticism that could be satisfied by nothing short of the program's repeal. These critics are as naïve as those who unconditionally defend the program in every aspect. . . . The renewal law has virtues as well as vices and the vices exist largely because the measure is actually a half-measure. (p. 155)

Choices, Choices, and More Choices

One initial approach, the successful but highly controversial strategy of attracting or retaining residents who would otherwise choose to live in the suburbs, did not survive for long. Urban renewal programs in Boston (the West End), Detroit (Lafayette Park), Philadelphia (Society Hill), San Francisco (Golden Gateway), and Manhattan (Lincoln Towers), as well as many other cities, bore a bitter-sweet history of displacement and abused relocation policies, but also gave strong testimony of cities' ability to capture some middle- and upper-income residents at a period when bankers and builders were heavily investing in the suburbs (Gans, 1962; Garvin, 1996; Hartman, 1964; Thomas, 1997). (Actually, the missing half measure that Charles Abrams [1965] lamented was a complementary affordable housing replacement program.)

In fact, in 1960, University of Pennsylvania planners Chester Rapkin and William G. Grigsby provided an insightful roadmap for understanding city markets in *Residential Renewal in the Urban Core,* and a year later economic development consultant Morton Hoffman (1961), writing in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, declared, "The prospects for growth of this [downtown housing] market are fine . . . if a more attractive housing product and environment are provided" (p. 43). Although Rapkin/Grigsby and Hoffman believed that the downtown market would be confined to childless households of above-average income, University of California, Berkeley, housing expert Catherine Bauer Wurster (1964) chimed in differently. In "Can Cities Compete with Suburbs?" she argued for city living for family households, asserting that urban life could be marketable if municipalities provided amenities—primarily schools and open space—similar to those of the suburbs.

But by the late 1960s, planners and policymakers were under tremendous political pressure to move away from middle- and upper-income housing as an urban redevelopment strategy. (By 1973, when President Richard M. Nixon called for a moratorium on all federal renewal programs, they were completely out of it.) Commercial interests viewed downtown as suitable only for traditional central business functions—office, retail, and such supportive commercial activities as office suppliers, restaurants, hotels, and entertainment. Neighborhood advocates litigiously objected to policies promoting middle- and upper-income housing that physically displaced lower-income groups or diverted funds away from affordable shelter efforts.

Demographic Patterns from the 1960s to the 1990s

As the opposing groups debated the pros and cons of downtown development, they argued against a backdrop of continuous suburbanization. The discussions began in the 1950s, when 85% of the nation's population growth was occurring in metropolitan areas, with the suburbs experiencing about a 30% increase and the cities only about 5%. They continued through the 1970s, when the suburbs absorbed 95% of the nation's metropolitan growth, and into the next decade as suburbs captured a 77% share (Gottman, 1961; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2000). As has been well documented, the resulting settlement patterns featured concentrations of White, middle- and upper-income groups in the suburbs, and minority, low-income populations in the city. Noting this as early as 1968, the Kerner Commission cautioned the nation about its emerging dual and separate (Black/White, poor/rich) societies, and later the U.S. Census Bureau's monitoring reports confirmed this fear (National Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968; State of the Cities Data Systems, 2001). For example, in 1997 the Census Bureau estimated that the nation's Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) had a poverty rate (expressed as the percent of population below the poverty line) of 12.7%. The central city poverty rate (18.7%) was double that of the suburbs (9.1%). Furthermore, while the suburban rate had hovered around 9% since 1969, the center city's level had increased 31% between 1969 and 1997.

By the late 1960s, upheavals caused by urban renewal and highway construction combined with economic conditions leading to high levels of unemployment, and social practices related to racial discrimination had fostered devastating civil disorder in many of the nation's cities. These events helped accelerate the decline of downtowns and their surroundings in the ensuing decade. At the same time, with widespread Rust Belt-to-Sun Belt population shifts between 1970 and 1980, many cities hemorrhaged population (Cleveland −24%, Minneapolis −15%, St. Louis −27%) while others were flooded with newcomers (Houston +29%, Phoenix +36%, San Diego +26%).

In this climate, politicians and planners worked feverishly on commercial projects, trying to stem the tides of decline or accommodate the waves of new growth. After passage of the Housing and Community Development Act in 1974, legislation that substituted block grants and housing rental certificates for the former renewal and construction programs, they used a portion of the funding to craft complex public/private partnerships for redevelopment, still intent on capturing outside suburban or tourist dollars (Sagalyn, 1990). When they did consider housing, they focused on low-income units almost exclusively. With their suburban populations increasing (or at least not losing at the pace of the cities) and their now-traditional combination of downtown office/retail/entertainment and low-cost housing programs, public officials did not see middle- and upper-income housing as an issue about which they needed to be concerned.[3]

In many places the CBD and associated-use strategies paid off, as cities rebuilt their cores with modern skyscrapers that so transformed their skylines that many labeled the phenomenon "Manhattanization," either proudly or pejoratively, depending on their sympathies. Boston, which had about 26 million square feet of downtown office space in 1960, built about 18 million more in the next 16 years, about one third of which was contributed by several urban renewal projects, notably the Prudential Center, John Hancock/Copley Square, and Government Center. These initial investments stimulated others, so that by 2000, the mid-1970s inventory of 44 million square feet had grown to 56 million, making Boston the fourth largest office market in the nation after New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC. (Anderson, 2001; Mollenkopf, 1983). In Baltimore, the 33-acre Charles Center project evolved over a decade to produce 1.8 million square feet of new offices, 430,000 square feet of retail space, and parking for 4,000 cars and supported a 40% increase in jobs for the area (Garvin, 1996).

In addition to these activities, urban renewal would provide important impetus for other downtown facilities, especially the increasingly important "third sector" or educational and medical facilities, and in entertainment and sports. In Detroit, Wayne State University expanded on a well located urban renewal site. In New York City, New York University gained dormitories, and the Bronx-based Fordham University, a Manhattan campus. Madison Square Garden moved into a mixed-use office complex, and a cleared 45-acre site gave new homes to many of the city's most prestigious institutions whose performances were soon announced throughout the world as "Live from Lincoln Center."

The 1980s Bring Changes

The decades-long revitalization debates revolving around downtown vs. neighborhood/affordable housing production took on new forms in the 1980s. On the public side, federal tax policy had dramatic effects on real estate investment strategies. Whereas tax laws passed in 1976 and amended in 1981 gave favorable treatment to depreciation and historic preservation, factors that fueled some early downtown living efforts in cities with large stocks of historic properties, the Tax Reform Act of 1986 eliminated these elements but created a low-income housing tax credit. This device could be used for multifamily housing projects often packaged as mixed income with some apartments, usually 20%, reserved for affordable units. There were no location constraints on these arrangements, so some downtowns benefited. Also, the Federal Housing Administration had extended its multifamily mortgage insurance under the National Housing Act, section 221, to include for-profit sponsors. This provision insured new construction and rehabilitation of HUD-eligible projects financed by private lenders, and at least one developer in the sample cities relied on it.

At the same time, discontent with the federal public housing program stimulated experimental approaches with rebuilding troubled projects. Boston's mid-1980s transformation of the notorious Columbia Point into a sellout Harbor Point received a good deal of publicity (Vale, 2000). Although a nationwide program (HOPE VI) was not created until 1992, housing experts had already determined that the Boston model, incorporating physical redesign and introduction of market-rate units, was the only way to cure dysfunctional projects. Many local officials eyed downtown sites for these first efforts.

Another innovation was the creation of linkage policies between large-scale commercial projects and housing, usually (but not always) affordable dwellings. Several cities including Boston, Washington, DC, and San Francisco attempted this approach but in the end did not achieve major shelter increases (J. Fondersmith, personal communication, June 12, 2001; Keating, 1986; McGovern, 1998). Washington, DC, even targeted the linked housing to specific downtown locations through zoning regulations, but not one developer took the bait. In another example, New York City's Battery Park City, the mixed-use, state-sponsored downtown development having about 8,000 middle- and upper-income apartments, succeeded in securing the necessary political support for its plan only after pledging substantial payments to the City for affordable housing on less central land in the Big Apple (M. Frucher, personal communication, March 18, 2001; Gordon, 1997).

By the early 1980s, the antidowntown-housing stance began to shift on the private side. Changes in residential tastes and household and labor force composition contributed. Other factors were also in play. For example, congestion induced by suburban sprawl was making the commute to work unbearable. City living was becoming more interesting now that the center had more entertainment facilities and other amenities. An identifiable market for downtown living slowly began to emerge.

Furthermore, urban leaders were realizing that their cities would remain economically and demographically unbalanced and have lifeless, ghost-town centers if nothing were done to substitute an 18- or 24-hour downtown for the current 8-hour workday. Some cities, such as Denver, Seattle, and San Francisco, reflected this by adding a housing component to their downtown plans (Keating & Krumholz, 1991). In others, fiscal watchdogs knew that with the tightening of federal funding in the 1980s, municipalities needed to strengthen their locally generated resource base—real estate, income, or wage and sales taxes—in order to meet city obligations, especially the budgetary strains associated with having high concentrations of poverty within their borders. All sought innovative solutions to reinventing their centers, viewing the promotion of middle- and upper-income housing as an option (Gratz, 1998).

Finally, the emerging, powerful business improvement district (BID) movement would play an important role in passing this message along. While the first large cohort of BIDs formed in the mid 1980s, by 2001 there would be more than 800 such groups in North America. As they achieved their original missions of providing safe and clean downtowns, they began to rally economic and political support for downtown living (Houston, 1997; Levy, 2001; Mitchell, 2001).

The confluence of these sentiments would provide a sympathetic climate, often sweetened with powerful incentives for downtown housing—tax abatements, regulatory reform, and infrastructure investments including sidewalk or waterfront improvement or parking garages. The private sector responded, often with adaptive re-use projects. In some cities, they spontaneously invested in experimental (sometimes illegal) efforts; in others, they worked with the public sector.

The First Stirrings

In older industrial cities, notably in New York's South Houston Industrial Area (SoHo), lofts (large, open space on each floor of multistory factories and warehouses) progressed from being cheap living/working spaces for artists (and others characterized as low in income but high in sophistication) to expensive, much sought after fashionable residences. This occurred in the space of about 20 years. Occupying industrial-zoned spaces—in 1977 the New York City Planning Department declared that 92% of the Big Apple's loft dwellings were illegal—the early settlers became so numerous that they forced the regulatory changes that later made the units attractive to more traditional investors (Field & Irving, 1999; Rapkin, 1963; Zukin, 1982). The loft style spread throughout the nation (and the world), and one authority explained the phenomenon this way: "Lofts have become . . . a staple ingredient in the way urban living has been idealized through the media and advertising" (Field & Irving, p. 1). In cities with hot real estate markets, the conversions occurred more or less spontaneously, but in others, favorable federal or local tax treatment and other incentives made the deals attractive.

In other places such as Denver, increases in the labor force and losses in residents prompted action.[4] In 1980, the Denver Housing Authority contracted architects/planners Theodore Liebman and R. Alan Melting and environmental psychologist Susan Saegart to undertake a visioning exercise for the city's future that would take into account, among other things, the entrance of women and working parents into the labor force.

A consortium of public agencies, private corporations, and foundations immediately asked the team to focus on two housing questions: Who wants to live in the city? How big is the market for urban housing? Through extensive public participation—20 workshops and group interviews with more than 100 local residents, realtors, and developers—the researchers not only determined that a group of "urban pioneers" was already living in the area, but also identified a cohort of potential downtown dwellers. Saegart then devised a market survey of the city's labor force, a tool that more than 60% of the cities in the University of Pennsylvania study would later employ in the 1990s. Querying workers in 53 companies and institutions, her analysis of 2,631 responses highlighted a strong market for downtown housing among single women and men, single mothers, and unmarried couples living together (Saegart et al., 1985). Shortly, the city's newly elected mayor, who had made the creation of downtown housing part of his campaign, picked up this work. However, an economic collapse in the early 1980s stymied all these activities until a revival at the end of the decade.

Public and private groups, notably the Denver Urban Redevelopment Authority; Historic Denver, Incorporated; and the newly created BID, Downtown Denver Partnership (DDP), focused on housing production. They worked to create a 25-block Lower Downtown (LoDo) historic district, revise the area's zoning to accommodate loft conversions, offer tax incentives, and float a bond to support street improvements. In 1993, the DDP sponsored a second study, "Downtown Denver Employee Demographics and Housing Demand Report," and also established a Housing Support Office to facilitate marketing (ASI Associates, 1993; University of Pennsylvania, 1999). By 1997, LoDo sported 450 loft conversions, predominantly in the for-sale market, and 430 low-income and market-rate rentals. In 2000, the area had about 2,100 residents, but was expecting a lot more with the June 2001 announcement of the expected construction of 500 apartment units (Downtown Denver Partnership, 2001; Marcus & Millichap, 2001; Weiss, 1998).

The Movement Gains Momentum in the 1990s

By the early 1990s, more public and private city leaders across the nation began to implement production strategies for downtown housing. There has been a great deal of variation in their selection of techniques, as well as in their rates of progress. In general, they have employed at least six types of approaches, often blending several: (1) fostering adaptive reuse of office buildings, warehouses, factories, and stores; (2) building on "found" land, such as a reclaimed waterfronts or remediated brownfield sites; (3) redeveloping public housing through HOPE VI; (4) crafting mixed-use projects with new construction; (5) targeting niche markets, such as senior or student housing; and (6) using historic preservation to forge a special identity. To accomplish these ends, they have engaged in creative financing, leveraged public funds, offered tax credits, raised gap financing pools, and employed any other tools at their disposal. Figure 1 shows examples of downtown housing in four cities.

Philadelphia, Lower Manhattan, and Boston present examples of the office-conversion trend, while Atlanta, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, and Cleveland have employed warehouse/store adaptive reuse. Charlotte represents a combination of HOPE VI, new construction, and historic preservation, and Milwaukee, with its riverfront redevelopment (including brownfields remediation); Cincinnati, with its expressway diversion/riverfront development; Des Moines, with its construction of a new downtown neighborhood; and New York at Battery Park City have used the "found" land method. Chicago is the king of mixed-use new construction. Columbus (Georgia), Lexington, and Chattanooga have fostered historic districting as a means to protect older, downtown residential neighborhoods.

Philadelphia, Lower Manhattan, and Boston had excess stocks of Class B and Class C office buildings in central locations.[5] Stimulated by tax abatement and, in the New York case, an area plan and zoning changes, these places would experience remarkable transformations. Active BID leaders, notably Paul Levy of Philadelphia's Center City District and Carl Weisbrod of New York's Alliance for Downtown, engaged in tireless promotional efforts. Their organizations sponsored market studies and informational brochures, lobbied for public assistance, and, in Manhattan, facilitated a developer consortium to subsidize a much needed supermarket. Soon

FIGURE 1. Forms of downtown housing (clockwise from top left): A factory conversion in New Orleans, office redevelopment in Philadelphia, and new construction in Seattle and Chicago.

classic buildings such as 45 Wall Street and the Old Philadelphia Stock Exchange in these cities' financial districts were residences. By 2001, Philadelphians had 1,708 newly converted units in 17 buildings, and Lower Manhattan, 4,057 units in 43 buildings (Gray, 2001; P. Levy, personal communications, June 7 & July 3, 2001; C. Weisbrod, personal communication, June 8, 2001).

An un expected test of the strength of Lower Manhattan downtown emerged with the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, an event that not only affected the nation deeply, but also uprooted residents in nearby converted buildings and Battery Park City (Johnson & Bagli, 2001; Rozhon, 2001). In the immediate aftermath, real estate experts were divided about the event's long-term effect on residential uses. The World Trade Center reconstruction will take several years, and the emotional bruise will be long-lasting. Nonetheless, the area's locational advantages (unique units, excellent transportation, access to the waterfront, and the presence of schools and cultural amenities), the presence of 50 million square feet of remaining office space, and the talent and resolve of local leaders promise to provide a strong foundation for the continuation of the trend, albeit at a slower pace and with units being more affordable, as landlords and owners adjust prices to market realities.

Boston, which has been unsuccessful in creating a downtown BID, did have a membership group, the Downtown Crossing Association, that began sponsoring cleanup and promotional activities in an area adjacent to the Boston Common. Along nearby Tremont Street, investors snapped up several properties for conversion and a large site for new construction of a mixed-use project combining hotel and residential functions (A. R. Meyers, personal communication, May 18, 2001). The new residences primarily housed affluent, childless households, but in Boston and Philadelphia a substantial number were dedicated to student housing by the universities that had purchased the real estate.

Midwestern cities with an abundance of abandoned or underused warehouses, stores, or other structures have experienced similar conversion successes. In Cincinnati, the former Shillito department store has supplied 98 units, and two other imminent projects will add another 200 units (K. Schwab, personal communication, July 25, 2001). In Cleveland, the formerly fashionable Statler Hotel, located on the city's famous Euclid Avenue, fared poorly when converted to offices, but now seems to be poised for a brighter future as rental apartments in a renovation scheme that offers 60 different floor plans for potential residents (K. Stapleton, personal communication, July 27, 2001).

Charlotte represents an example of an effort to combine historic preservation, senior housing, HOPE VI, and new construction of mixed-use and single-purpose buildings. Leading the effort was Hugh McColl, chairman of the Bank of America, recently headquartered in the Queen City. McColl and his associates envisioned a wholesale downtown revitalization that included energizing the city's BID, Charlotte City Partners, by hiring the well-regarded Rob Walsh as executive director; working with municipal agencies on planning and economic development to develop a downtown plan, *Vision 2010*; supporting new cultural and sports facilities, improved open space, and transportation; and adding amenities such as day care and, of course, housing. Over the course of the past 10 years, the private and public sectors built or restored so many dwelling units (including about 400 apartments and single-family homes in its First Ward HOPE VI project and 500 apartments in and around Gateway Village, a mixed-use project undertaken by Cousins Properties and the Bank of America also containing 1.2 million square feet of office, more than 2,000 parking spaces, and a 2-acre park) that the population in one downtown census tract increased 26% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001; R. Walsh, personal communication, April 9, 2001).[6]

In the "found land" category, local developers in Milwaukee are converting or building more than 600 units (including the 116-apartment building Trostel Square on a former tannery site) in an area linked to the downtown on land partially composed of the former beerline, a rail right-of-way used to transport the golden brew. This project represents a sustained effort to encourage private investment through public infrastructure improvements that have included construction of an access road, sewer and water lines, a section of the city's Riverwalk along the 3,400-foot bank of the Milwaukee River that bounds the site, extensive retaining walls along with long stairways to connect an adjacent neighborhood to the riverfront, and a state-sponsored brownfields remediation program for environmental cleanup (Engberg Anderson Design Partnership,1999; D. McCarthy & M. Prioletta, personal communication, July 18, 2001; McIntosh, 2001).[7] Finally, New York's Battery Park City, created on 92 acres of waterfront landfill left from the World Trade Center excavation, has more than 8,000 apartments.

Several cities are embarking on creating new neighborhoods on found land. In Cincinnati, a public/private partnership is engaged in a massive riverfront reclamation project to depress Interstate 75, extend the downtown to the water, and include housing among the new uses (Riverfront Advisors Commission, 1999; T. Sharp, personal communication, July 25, 2001). In Des Moines, plans for a new Court Avenue district anticipate the construction of 2,000 residential units in the next 10 years, with the groundbreaking for the first block taking place shortly (C. Greenfield, personal communication, July 20, 2001; Housing Task Force, 2000). And in Chattanooga, plans for the restoration of the Southside district include the construction of a new school and other public amenities around the New-Urbanist-inspired Cowert Place, which has affordable ownership units. (Coulter, 2001; J. Stroud Watson, personal communication, July 27, 2001).

Columbus (Georgia) along with Lexington, Detroit, and Chattanooga have promoted and protected residential historic districts in their downtowns. Lexington, for example, has six historic districts within the downtown boundaries, while investors in Columbus have restored 54 houses and a warehouse for student housing in its 30-block historic district since 1996 (E. Barker, personal communication, July 23, 2001; R. M. Lucas, personal communication, July 25, 2001; B. R. Quick, personal communication, July 23, 2001). Detroit's recently designated Lower Woodward historic district is seeing renovation of a three-structure block for lofts, and Chattanooga's 14-block Fort Wood historic district is near the city's newest attractions (K. F. Beebe & R. Binno, personal communication, July 16, 2001; Coulter, 2001; A. Coulter & J. Stroud Watson, personal communication, July 24, 2001)

Downtown Living: A Deeper Look

These activities are representative of the phenomena that inspired Brookings/Fannie Mae to highlight the growing movement in the reports that first anticipated and later monitored the progress in selected cities. While the publications alerted the nation to what was happening, the reports did have some limits, ones that inspired my larger study. For I believed, as did the funders, that more systematic and detailed scrutiny would be useful in appraising the role of downtown housing in current metropolitan development. A deeper look at the rise of downtown living would also assist in the evaluating, planning, and implementation strategies and in crafting new approaches in the next decades. Although such a study would not substitute for a broader understanding of regional dynamics, piecing together the story of downtown housing would supply one segment of a larger vision.

I began the study in summer 1999, and it is still ongoing, with census data analysis, survey research, personal interviews, and field visits in the selected cities, shown in Figure 2. It has multiple objectives: first, to define downtowns by census tracts in order to use a 1970 baseline (chosen because it was about a generation ago and it was the first year that suburban populations exceeded urban levels) and to trace data over time; second, to craft a more representative sample (45 cities—37% of the nation's 100 most populous cities selected for balanced regional distribution, and of these, 100% of the top 10 and 62% of the top 50; in all, the sample includes 19% of the 243 cities having a population of 100,000 or more); and third, to take a look at the mechanisms that encouraged this growth.

With the help of local respondents, I have mapped the downtowns of the entire sample. (Seems like an easy task, but have you ever tried to figure out the downtown boundaries of your city?) I have collected data (supplied prior to winter 2001 by Claritas, a market research firm, and later by the U.S. Census Bureau) on nine population and housing factors for the downtowns, cities, and MSAs. I have administered two mail surveys, one in 1999 and another in 2001, of city officials and BID leaders to identify their respective roles in encouraging downtown housing. Finally, I am currently engaged in making site visits to all the cities.

I have a number of findings to report now, and in another publication will provide more information in greater depth. The early results are as follows: First, the definition of "downtown" is elusive. Although most people think they understand what "downtown" is, in actuality it is a word that takes on different meanings in different eras. It is so difficult to pinpoint that 35 years ago, even the renowned downtown planner Victor Gruen (1964) sidestepped the problem by rejecting the term altogether and labeling the area "the metropolitan core" or "heart of the city" (p. 47). Later, historian Carl Abbott (1993) explained the definitional difficulties: "'downtown' as a constructed concept . . . has undergone surprisingly rapid changes. . . . These mutable understandings have certainly been rooted in the changing social and economic structure of American cities" (p. 407). It is not surprising, then, that there is no single socioeconomic meaning nor geographical boundary for the term. While U.S. downtowns share several common characteristics (a central business district at the core, access to substantial transportation networks, a supply of high-density buildings), they differ dramatically in their age, territory, functions, contents, and character.

Downtowns are in a state of flux, as their contents and boundaries are changing. Where they are incorporating residences they are also attracting more community-serving facilities—the supermarket or cineplex—ones that are usually found in neighborhoods. Where cities invest in major facilities—a stadium or performing arts center—at the edges of their downtowns, then "downtown" uses like restaurants, retail, and hotels grow around them. Sometimes enthusiastic realtors and BID directors include a larger-than-expected area, or plan-

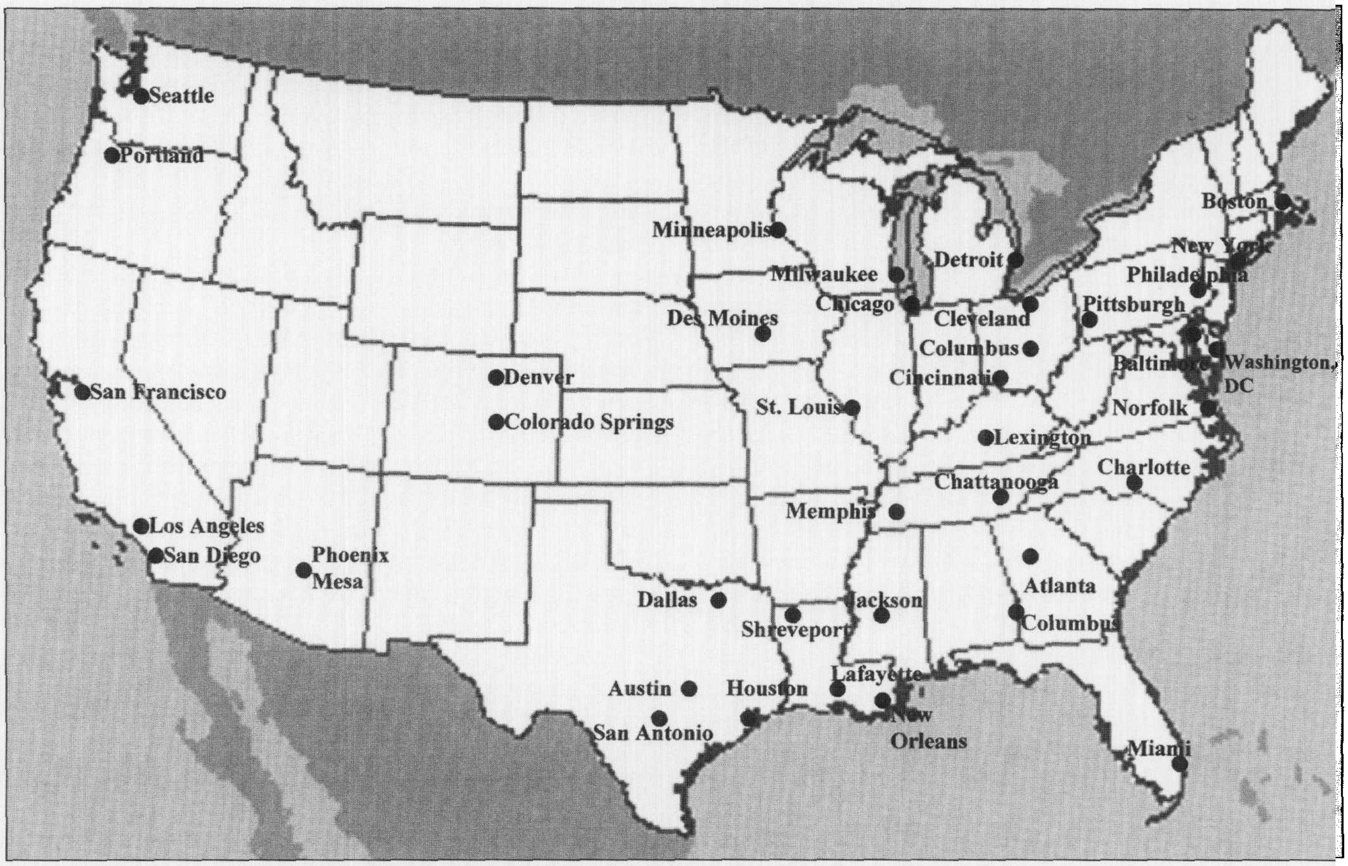


FIGURE 2. Cities included in the study "Downtown Living: A Deeper Look."

ning officials anticipating outward growth add areas in transition to their definitions of downtown. The maps of the downtowns, created as part of this study, illustrate the size variations. As Figure 3 shows, Boston's downtown covers 2,800 acres (more than 4 square miles), while Phoenix's contains 970 acres (about 1.5 square miles). Finally, tracking downtown boundaries over time reveals that they are expanding. In almost all the sample cities, the CBDs of 20 years ago and the downtowns of today are remarkably different (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999).

Second, while many downtowns have experienced increases in their residential populations in the past decade, this rise is small and delicate. The rates of increase vary enormously among cities. And while downtown growth rates are impressive, numerical counts for metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) still overshadow those of downtowns. Measuring the growth against basic benchmarks (1970 population levels for the defined downtowns and comparative growth rates with city and MSA) reveals just how fragile this movement is. For example, only 38% of the sample cities had more downtown residents in 2000 than they did in 1970 (see Figure 4). Only a third had a downtown population growth rate between 1970 and 2000 that was greater than that of their cities. For the same period, 42% of the sample showed a negative downtown growth rate when their cities had positive numbers. Finally, only seven cities (Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York, Norfolk, San Francisco, and Seattle) had downtown growth rates that exceeded those of their MSAs in the 30-year period.

Looking at the data decade-by-decade tells a different story. Not surprisingly, downtown population decline was the most severe in the 1970s, when 89% of the sample showed losses that ranged from 2.4% (Des Moines) to 60% (Orlando). In the 1980s the situation brightened, with only 42% of the downtowns losing residents, and by the 1990s more than three quarters (78%) of the sample posted increases. However, only four cities (Los Angeles, New York, San Diego, and Seattle) had gains in all three decades. Comparing city and MSA data shows similar nuances.

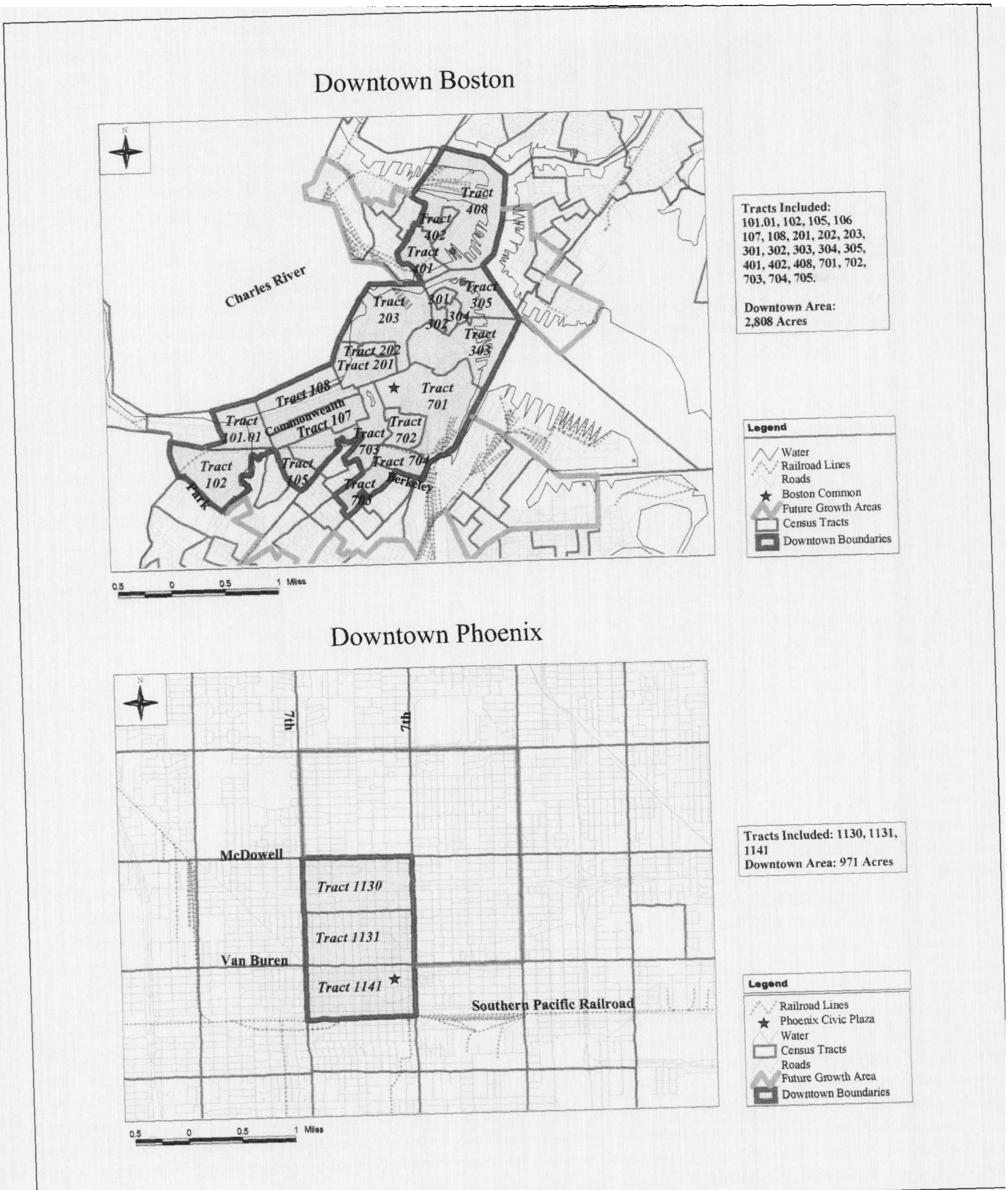
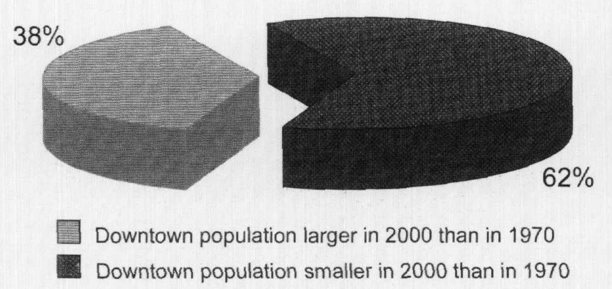


FIGURE 3. Example of differences in downtown sizes, Boston vs. Phoenix.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1970, 2001)

FIGURE 4. Percentages of study city downtowns gaining or losing population between 1970 and 2000.

Finally, downtowns vary greatly in the amount and level of residential development. For example, in 2000, 24% of the sample cities had 20,000 or more downtown residents, while 20% had less than 5,000. Also, a great deal of diversity exists within the categories. Denver's downtowners number a little over 4,200, but most observers perceive the city's record in attracting residents as a standout success. In contrast, Cincinnati, with only about 3,200, is struggling to maintain a critical mass. At the other end of the scale, Chicago's 73,000 are knit into the larger metropolis, as are Philadelphia's 78,000. All in all, each of these downtown precincts has an individual character.

This analysis must also consider the proportion of a city's population that downtown residential presence represents. Again, there is great variation among the sample cities. For example, Boston and Philadelphia have roughly equal downtown populations, but Boston's comprises 14% of the total while Philadelphia's is only 5%.

Finally, a simple numerical listing of the sample downtowns is misleading. Downtown population growth has occurred at varying rates, with some cities experiencing the phenomenon for a longer time than others. This may account for the greater success of some. Also, given the varying geographical size of the different downtowns, density measures as well as demographic analysis should be added to any assessment in order to gauge the potential impact (economic, political, social) of new residents.

Third, the success of the past 10 years has deep roots. It is the fruit of more than 5 decades of sustained attention to downtowns and has come about because cities have steadily improved their environments through downtown planning and additions of new elements to reinvent their old CBDs. In so doing, they have transformed them into new, hip places, thus making downtown competitive and attractive for housing. Although specific municipal policies such as favorable tax treatment, zoning amendments, and infrastructure investments have, without doubt, flamed the private market activities in downtown housing, public investment in large-scale projects dating from the mid 1950s to the present have helped create a sympathetic climate for this investment.

Downtown housing is not a silver bullet for curing city ills, but a symbiotic part of an ongoing reconstruction exercise. Although my research is rudimentary, preliminary evidence shows a strong relationship between investor choices and the presence of downtown amenities. For example, developers in Los Angeles, Denver, Baltimore, Detroit, and Memphis cite the presence of stadiums or sports arenas as important factors in their location decisions (Meyers, 2001). Last year, Geoff Palmer, currently battling the Los Angeles City Council over an unfavorable decision for one of his downtown apartment complexes, reflected that when he decided to build the $100 million, 658-unit Medici apartments in downtown L. A., the nearby Staples Center, a recently opened basketball, hockey, and concert facility, "was an added consideration." He observed, "I knew that with the Staples Center there would be an exodus back to the city.... I knew it would generate a lot of activity just as the stadiums in Denver and Baltimore did" (Newman, 2000, p. 7). Supporting his intuition was Donald R. Spivack, Deputy Director, Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency: "Staples is bringing people downtown.... [They] are pleasantly surprised when they come down here that downtown is a fairly attractive place to be" (Newman, 2000, p. 7).

Fourth, downtowners are more affluent, more highly educated, and more White than city dwellers overall, but more diverse than those in the MSA. Singles, empty-nesters, gays, and childless or small households are more highly represented in downtowns than in MSAs. Families with children are present but not dominant. Other submarkets have appeared: students and the elderly.[8]

In some cities where the housing market is tight, notably Boston, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, low- and moderate-income groups are reporting difficulty in finding space for affordable housing. In other cities like Charlotte that have an excess of downtown land, often devoted to parking lots, the issue is not that of space but cost. In these contexts, questions of what resources should be devoted to high-rent downtown units are arising yet again.

New populations are demanding new services. When childless householders have families, they want schools, open space, and other amenities not usually found downtown. In the more populous places, downtowners are not only crying for more community-serving facilities, but also can be in conflict with commercial interests regarding services. In the New York example, before September 11, a major water main improvement project drove a battle about the timing of the work—night or day (Hamilton, Rabinowitz & Altschuler, Inc., 2001; C. Weisbrod, personal communication, June 8, 2001).

Fifth, promoting downtown housing has emerged as a central strategy of private downtown groups, mainly BIDs, working in league with municipal government, often city planning and/or economic development departments. These groups have focused their economic and leadership resources on strengthening their downtowns with beefed-up safety and security. Many have concluded that promoting the 24-hour downtown is an essential part of this mission. To this end, in 59% of the sample, BIDS or other privately sponsored organizations have engaged in prohousing campaigns. The amount and nature of their efforts vary widely. As membership organizations, their internal needs drive the agenda. For those with districts having high commercial vacancy rates (as in Philadelphia or Lower Manhattan), diverting energy to residential conversion makes economic sense. In fact, in both cities, reducing the amount of rentable space in Class B buildings lowered commercial vacancy rates dramatically.

Sixth, in the past decade, downtown growth has contributed to the numeric changes in citywide populations in many cities. Although, as Table 2 indicates, the percentage contribution to overall municipal growth is often quite small, in 53% of the sample cities the downtown numerical contribution is a significant portion of the total, and in another 22% of the sample cities, the downtown portion has offset citywide losses. In other words, without the downtown population growth, 75% of the sample would be worse off. In Boston, for example, downtowners constituted 25% of the increased number of people living in the city, while in Pittsburgh the additional downtowners reduced the city's population loss by one percentage point.

These calculations only hint at the meaning of increased downtown populations. In the coming months, as the U.S. Census Bureau releases 2000 household, income, and labor force participation data, a more precise analysis will be possible. Additionally, my study will include case studies of individual cities that reveal more detail about the group's economic impact on their cities.

What a Longer View of Downtown Living Reveals

This essay started with the declaration that "it all sounds so easy and looks so clear," but it isn't. And as the narrative has demonstrated, the issue is far more complex than the original studies implied. Making sense of the downtown living phenomenon requires not only placing it in the context of urban redevelopment discussions and programs over an extended period but also having an understanding of how national economic trends and suburban development have played out over time. This exercise uncovers the debates about the nature and contents of downtowns that have spanned the postwar era. It shows how single-focus, CBD-based approaches have not been successful. It also reveals how public policy and private investment decisions have worked by trial and error: What looks like a perfect strategy in one decade—promoting large-scale public housing, attracting modern office buildings, excluding middle- and upper-income housing from public subsidy programs—has in another seemed misguided. So there have been fits and starts as cities have tried a variety of measures.

This situation is not so bad as it sounds. Urban policymakers have never had perfect knowledge, they work in variable socioeconomic environments, and they have been subject to the political whims of their constituencies, especially when they engaged in urban revitalization. They have made decisions that seemed right for the times, and perhaps they were, but the times and conditions changed. They found ways to adjust their approaches. So what if the pedestrian malls of yesteryear did not work very well? They learned that festival malls did much better. What is important is that they have given sustained attention to downtowns, and this effort is just beginning to pay off.

Downtowns, it turns out, are ever-changing places. Their functions, their boundaries, and their very character have been evolving over the past 50 years. They are like complicated jigsaw puzzles, with players (urban leaders) fitting the pieces together slowly. Just as assemblers first frame a puzzle and then fill in the center, city leaders have provided infrastructure outlines—streets or street improvements, schools, redeveloped river edges, improved open space—and now are adding other parts. Downtown living is one. Certainly, in many places, it has fit very well, especially in the past 10 years. In a few cases, it is contributing significantly to the numerical increase in population enjoyed by some cities. Just as certainly, many downtowns have not really kept up with their MSAs, and a majority of cities have yet to recover their 1970 populations. Nonetheless, having formerly vacant

TABLE 2. Effects of downtown population growth on city population growth, 1990–2000.

Contribution of downtown population growth to city population growth

City	Downtown population 1990 (a)	Downtown population 2000 (b)	Downtown population Increase 1990–2000 (c)	City population 1990 (d)	City population 2000 (e)	City population Increase 1990–2000 (f)	Downtown share of city growth (c/f)	Downtown contribution to city growth (c/e)
Miami	15,143	19,927	4,784	358,548	362,470	3,922	121.98%	1.33%
Boston	77,253	80,903	3,650	574,283	589,141	14,858	24.57	0.64
Atlanta	19,763	24,931	5,168	394,017	416,474	22,457	23.01	1.31
Chattanooga	12,898	13,529	631	152,466	155,554	3,088	20.43	0.41
San Francisco	32,906	43,531	10,625	723,959	776,733	52,774	20.13	1.47
Chicago	56,048	72,843	16,795	2,783,726	2,896,016	112,290	14.96	0.60
Seattle	12,292	18,983	6,691	516,259	563,374	47,115	14.20	1.30
Salt Lake City	4,824	5,939	1,115	159,936	181,743	21,807	5.11	0.70
Shreveport	377	443	66	198,525	200,145	1,620	4.07	0.03
Portland	9,528	12,902	3,374	437,319	529,121	91,802	3.68	0.77
Lafayette	2,759	3,338	579	94,440	110,257	15,817	3.66	0.61
Memphis	7,606	8,994	1,388	610,337	650,100	39,763	3.49	0.23
New York	153,927	170,708	16,781	7,322,564	8,008,278	685,714	2.45	0.23
San Diego	15,417	17,894	2,477	1,110,549	1,223,400	112,851	2.19	0.22
Dallas	11,858	15,198	3,340	1,006,877	1,188,580	181,703	1.84	0.33
Denver	2,794	4,230	1,436	467,610	554,636	87,026	1.65	0.31
Colorado Springs	4,412	5,032	620	281,140	360,890	79,750	0.77	0.17
Albuquerque	8,496	9,187	691	384,736	448,607	63,871	1.08	0.18
Los Angeles	34,655	36,630	1,975	3,485,398	3,694,820	209,422	0.94	0.06
Boise	2,933	3,093	160	125,738	185,787	60,049	0.27	0.13
Des Moines	4,190	4,204	14	193,187	198,682	5,495	0.25	0.01
Houston	7,029	7,565	536	1,630,553	1,953,631	323,078	0.17	0.03
Austin	10,579	10,769	190	465,622	656,562	190,940	0.10	0.04
Columbus, OH	6,161	6,198	37	632,910	711,470	78,560	0.05	0.01

Reduction of city population loss by downtown population growth

City	Downtown population 1990 (a)	Downtown population 2000 (b)	Downtown population Increase 1990–2000 (c)	City population 1990 (d)	City population 2000 (e)	City population Decrease 1990–2000 (f)	Downtown offset of city loss (c/-c+f)	Downtown growth diminished city loss [(c+f)/d-f/d]
Detroit	34,872	35,618	746	1,027,974	951,270	–76,704	0.96%	0.07%
Baltimore	28,597	30,067	1,470	736,014	651,154	–84,860	1.70	0.20
Norfolk	2,390	2,881	491	261,229	234,403	–26,826	1.80	0.19
Washington, DC	26,597	27,667	1,070	606,900	572,059	–34,841	2.98	0.18
Milwaukee	15,039	16,359	1,320	628,088	596,974	–31,114	4.07	0.21
Philadelphia	74,686	78,349	3,663	1,585,577	1,517,550	–68,027	5.11	0.23
Cleveland	7,261	9,599	2,338	505,616	478,403	–27,213	7.91	0.46
New Orleans	6,988	8,051	1,063	496,938	484,674	–12,264	7.98	0.21
Pittsburgh	6,517	10,216	3,699	369,879	334,563	–35,316	9.48	1.00
Jackson	5,253	6,762	1,509	196,637	184,256	–12,381	10.86	0.77

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1990, 2001) and/or abandoned buildings occupied (and eventually paying taxes) and having more (and more diverse) people on the streets night and day, weekday and weekend, is a positive factor for urban life.

But it is not enough merely to acknowledge these accomplishments. There are other issues to attend to, ones related to individual downtowns. They might include an evaluation of the costs and benefits of attracting different types of downtowners. Or they might assess the reasons why some places have been more successful than others in gaining residents. This information would be useful, for example, for policymakers in cities having less developed downtowns who must first decide whether a downtown living approach is appropriate for their cities and, second, must determine whether supportive incentives or complementary activities are needed. Other questions revolve around how to spread downtown progress to nearby neighborhoods without provoking displacement or unwanted gentrification but supplying affordable units, and how to resolve the inevitable political disputes that will arise with the newcomers.

There are important planning and development issues, barely touched on in this essay, such as information on the critical mass required to make a difference in downtown life, the relationship between downtown housing units and employment, the number of households needed to support community-serving functions—all issues that lead to questions of balancing appropriate density for new development and quantity for adaptive reuse with other downtown functions such as office, parking, retail, and entertainment. No one really knows the proper composition of a balanced downtown.

Finally, a longer view on downtown living illustrates the importance of public/private partnerships. It shows the interplay between focused interest groups, especially the growing number of BID leaders, and public planning and economic development units. Their partnerships have evoked bold, imaginative, creative, and thoughtful approaches.

All in all, the rise in downtown living is just as complex and layered as urban revitalization strategies of the past. While widely reported in the popular press, it deserves a balanced, scholarly appraisal, one for which this essay lays a foundation and later work will provide detail.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the many people—funders, students, respondents, conference and lecture audiences, and others—who have contributed to this article. Any mistakes or errors within are her own. Of particular assistance in this project are and have been Carolina DeVoto, Daniella Eidelberg, Robert Lang, Paul Levy, David Lowin, Chris Mrozinski, Rebecca Sohmer, Jessica Whaley, and the numerous respondents in the sample downtowns.

NOTES

1. In some cases, the estimates for current downtown population were off by as much as 174%. Individual differences could be attributed to the enthusiasm of a respondent, as well as to changing definitions of a downtown area.
2. In fact, the authors of *Downtown Rebound* incorporated my boundaries and additional cities in their analysis.
3. Supporting this assertion is demographic data that shows that in representative MSAs, St. Louis and Cleveland had 2% and 6% declines respectively; Minneapolis experienced a 17% increase, and Houston and San Diego were up 45% and 37% respectively. Note that the MSA percentages include the center city and the suburbs.
4. In Denver, downtown employment had grown 22% in the 4 years between 1977 and 1981, while between 1970 and 1980 the city and downtown populations fell by more than 4% and 15% respectively.
5. Real estate experts rank office buildings with regard to their age and amenities, the most desirable being labeled Class A and the others in descending order Class B and Class C. When vacancy rates are high, usually the Class B and Class C buildings are more prone to losses of tenants.
6. The area under discussion here is Tract 1, one of six census tracts composing downtown Charlotte. While this tract has seen a great deal of activity, the other tracts have not. The data for downtown Charlotte in Table 1 contain the whole six-tract area, thus masking the intensity of change in Tract 1 in the past 10 years. Uneven performance is common among many cities having multitract downtowns.
7. Even though the Beerline project is not officially within the downtown, but abutting, I have included it to illustrate the "nearby neighborhood" or "spillover" syndrome that is also a feature of the downtown living movement. Like many cities that are more advanced in their downtown housing growth, Milwaukee has employed many techniques, including adding more than 300 units in new construction in East Point Center, about 200 in the traditional CBD, and about 400 units in its downtown historic district.
8. See Lachman and Miller (1985) for an early and extremely cogent discussion of the market for downtown housing.

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